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ABSTRACT

The methodologies employed in comparative higher education and comparative education are briefly summarized and analyzed. Weaknesses of the following approaches used by scholars/researchers in the field are identified: (1) locating decision-making structures and relations in broadly differentiated aggregations of systems; (2) case study; (3) cross-national comparisons (socialization, allocation and legitimation effects); (4) holistic or single topic; (5) natural history; (6) goal-directed political, economic functions of society; (7) controllable organizations (systems); (8) cultural institutions with their own lines of development; (9) bilateral negotiations. It is concluded that a method derived from a modification of Thorstein Veblen's remarks on higher learning would be more useful for comprehensive comparison. It is suggested that a method for comparative higher education should be developed that takes account of differing rates of development, differing values, differing habits of thought, and differing histories. Examples are drawn from descriptions of higher education issues in the United States, Sweden, France, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany. (Author/SW)

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COMMENTS ON METHOD IN COMPARATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Panel for Presentation at Session:
THEORY AND METHODOLOGY IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The methodologies employed in comparative higher education and comparative education are briefly summarized and analyzed. The conclusion suggests that a method derived from a modification of Thorstein Veblen's remarks on higher learning would be more useful for comprehensive comparison. Examples are drawn from descriptions of higher education issues in Sweden, France, United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Comments on Method in Comparative Higher Education

by Henry Wasser

Thorstein Veblen Higher Learning in America: Introduction

"An institution is, after all, a prevalent habit of thought and as such it is subject to the conditions and limitations that surround any change in the habitual frame of mind prevalent in the community."

"....higher learning of the modern, the current body of science and scholarship -- holds its place on such a tenure of use and wont, that it has grown and shifted in point of content, aims and methods in response to the changes in habits of life that have passed over the Western peoples during the period of its growth and ascendancy -- this process of change and supersession in the scope and method of knowledge is still effectively at work, in a like response to institutional changes that still are incontinently going forward."

"....higher learning takes its character from the manner of life enforced on the group by the circumstances in which it is placed."

In a brief survey of what may be called a methodology for comparative higher education, I find the following approaches have been taken by scholars/researchers in the field.

1. Locating decision-making structures and relations in broadly differentiated aggregations of systems.

2. Case study.

3. Cross-national comparisons: socialization, allocation and legitimation effects.

4. Holistic or single topic.

5. Natural History

6. Goal-directed political, economic functions of society.

7. Controllable organizations (systems).

8. Cultural institutions with their own lines of development.

9. Bilateral negotiations.

I have difficulties with these various approaches so far as delineating an effective method for comparing higher education issues in several countries. I note below what appears to me to be a weakness in each.

1. Decision-making structures and relations are sought in broadly differentiated aggregations of systems e.g. legalistic and loosely structured; or collections of single or of centralized or of institutional units.

   Is the broad category (e.g. legalistic) a meaningful, useable distinction? Does it link together what are not really closely related (French and German Higher Education)? Relating these systems to the immediate question of where the power is located, often results in inexactness.

2. Case study (e.g. comparison with respect to three categories -- history of reform; difference between goal and outcome; factors accounting for this difference).

This method does not truly provide for comparison because a system will have different degrees of emphasis on history, different factors accounting for the difference. In some instances an outcome may approximate a goal (Sweden) or be very far from the goal (I.U.T.'s in France). In some cases history may more clearly and substantively reveal factors causing differences (France).

3. Cross-national comparisons with respect to socialization, allocation and legitimation effects.

   How valuable is comparing these effects when the causes are not clearly compared?

4. Holistic or single topic (entire system labeled) wherein the simplifying phrase permits more dramatic conceptual or notional comparison.

   The characterizing phrase seems too simple of uncomplex to describe truly or completely a national system e.g. Germany -- politicized legalism; Sweden -- a consensus and state planning; U.S.A. -- dispersed control and market systems.

5. Natural history -- elaboration of each system in its own non-mechanical structure over time and comparison of natural histories.

   This may do for encyclopedic, morphological description of national systems but does little for comparison and insights deriving from comparisons.

6. Goal-directed political economic functions of society -- the political economic function of a national society is explained, its goal for higher education described, then compared.

   There is no precise analysis or generally accepted definition of these functions in major industrial countires; thus making a single country account difficult and comparison in terms of one topic problematic.

7. Controllable organizations (systems) -- delineate a model system of higher education, then compare actual systems to it.

   Increasingly while accounts of systems are precisely delineated, questions arise in establishing a model of systems (an ideal single system) against which the existing systems of higher education are measured. How meaningful can comparison be if measured against an ideal model? Systems measured against each other are more likely to reflect reality.

8. Cultural institutions with their individual lines of development -- describe a higher education system as a cultural institution and compare its individual lines of development.

Narrations of development for each system in terms of cultural organization can be set down side by side with differences and similarities noted, but there are the usual failings of comparison by juxtaposition i.e. neither a total sense of nor the configuration for the system emerges. And emphasis on similarities and dis-similarities may distort the uniqueness of individual systems.

9. Bilateral negotiations -- use one system to rectify or modify a perceived weakness or deficiency in another.

   In this approach two systems are compared for the purpose of proposing a constraining change in one by adapting a feature of the other e.g. proposing a free access higher education unit in Great Britain's elite higher education system to restrain slightly elitism, to finesse politically a move into mass higher education in Great Britain or to propose within a system several levels of access, academic freedom, and academic citizenship in order to preserve elite factors in a mass sytem.

   Fundamentally this is not comparison but proposals for change motivated by political calculation to confront and master anticipated social challenge.

Similar difficulties have developed with respect to methodology in comparative education. Following the Kelly and Altbach bibliography, we discover:

1. The comparative approach based on forces and factors shaping educational systems, national character and the realities of the school system results in analyses which are not concise and in which most space is devoted to description of the harsh realities of the school. The studies have been weak on one side of the comparison -- in identifying the forces shaping the educational sytem.

2. Comparison of ways in which education functions to maintain the state and in this approach comparing national school systems has turned out to be a narrowing and imprecise method. The definition of the state remained static.

3. For some researchers comparison has been really the desire to establish better norms, better categories for data collection and analysis. This, to be sure, can serve only as an introduction to comparative analysis.

4. School/society relations are compared as outlined in methodologies derived from the social sciences -- economics; political science; sociology; history; anthropology. Here the relation of school to society in the reports has been usually vague in formulation, not particularly aided by adapting a social science method to it. Moreover, application of method assumes that these social sciences

can necessarily be reduced to methodologies and that such methodologies as are derived are relevant. Distortion may result in that the reality of influence of reform or change in education systems of lesser powers may not be recognized.

5. World systems analysis--effects of international power relations on educational processes and outcomes. This, in effect, precludes comparison by superseding comprehensive national comparisons with a single, rigid topic-- power relations.

6. Modernization considered as a paradigm for research and as a point of comparison. This simply substitutes a linear, historical development and compares nations in different stages of that development, giving historical description but not comparative, societal analysis.

A discussion of the state of the art with respect to method in comparative education then seems to reduce concretely to a demand for and development of a formula for more precise data collection, statistics more acceptably gathered and categorized for interpretation. Thus even in the relatively older discipline of comparative education as well as in comparative higher education, method appears hardly to have gone beyond efficiency even though the opportunity for conceptualizing was present.

Comparisons in higher education must be between evolving institutions and structures. Access, for example, has a different meaning for German post-secondary education than for American post-secondary education because the demography is different and the social context varies. The baby boom (and thus the post-secondary age group) for historical reasons and the differing impacts of war and economy, comes a decade later in Germany than in the U.S.A., and appears also in a different phase of the economic, social cycle of the two countries. Comparison of access policy, consequently, has at least two variables before its facts can be cited.

Another illustration is Sweden where the successful effort to integrate all of higher education as contrasted to the general or particular inability to do so in France or Germany may be attributed to the special consensual politics, consensual evaluation process, and national commission study procedure. Some would attribute the success to the historic inability of the Swedish universities ever to attain ascendancy over other higher education units (art, drama, and other specialized schools) as was obtained in the United Kingdom and France, because of the 19th Century Grundtvigian attack on the traditional universities (the Danish Bishop Grundtvig had called them learned "schools of death"). Others, to the contrary, believe that the success was the result of the weakness and smallness of the other higher education units as compared to the universities, permitting any university change to prevail. In this analysis, once the government, students and junior faculty/staff forced a major change in the traditional university, the entire system was easily transformed. However, another factor may be that greater equalizing of power and distribution of wealth in Scandinavia than in Western Europe can be related to the successful integration, even radical change in Swedish higher education.

It is stated that the German higher education system is highly influenced directly by legislators and cabinet officers, makers of policy, who are of the civil servant caste. Administrative officials within higher education especially in the increasingly powerful position of chancellors are usually from the same social grouping. Most laws and regulations governing the universities are written and implemented by

civil servants, an important circumstance since lawas and regulations governing the universities are written and implemented by civil servants, an important circumstance since laws govern universities in Germany to a greater extent than in other Western industrial nations. To be sure, the traditional universities have successfully resisted actual laws e.g. the law describing the function and objectives of Gesamthochschulen reads much more decisively than reality has worked out for them.

In further illustrations of national contexts United Kingdom might be cited where the high civil servant caste introduced the binary system probably to ward off pressures from the 1960's which would have sharply expanded British universities and brought them to a condition of mass higher education.

One may assume that the coming to power in France of Mitterrand with a large number of newly elected deputies being teachers will affect the educational system. Already, laws are being prepared against aid to private education, and for the devolution or decentralization of the educational system which after many unsuccessful attempts since the 1960's appears now to be possible.

Evolving contextual analysis then as Veblen's words suggest would be a starting point for comparison. The continual differing changes within nations would be encompassed. The second necessity is an exact definition of an educational system.

Does a system simply come to exist as Archer says by cross-cut generalizations which can be made about combination of groups, material interests and cultural "switchmen" whose consequence was the emergence of educational systems?

Is an educational system basically a by-product of an evolved national history?

Or is the existing educational system always an elaboration over time of the system's internal structure but whose outlines are fundamentally the same for each nation and whose foundations, objectives, power distribution and so forth vary according to changing national contexts?

Adhering to the last proposition makes it possible to establish major structural features, for example, of an integrated higher education as common to several nations while pursuing the changing functions, objectives, content, methods, power loci as influenced by the differing, evolving contexts for each country. And in this fashion perhaps a more effective, "rolling" method of comparison within national higher education systems may be attained.

Each nation evolves differently and at a different pace to its individual and prevalent habit of thought. Changing habits of life are brought about by the peculiar circumstances in which the nation is placed. One's eye shifts between the perception of differences in the historical development of university institutions within each nation and constant elements of change which in turn are responded to in different ways.

In the recent period of expansion for universities the pressure came from perceived economic need and from a demand for social justice. But these two causes varied in significance and force from country to country according to each one's history, state of development.

Again in considering changes in the power of the professoriate; clearly, Western Europe differed from the United Kingdom and the United States. The senior civil servant status of the European continental university did not characterize the English-American academics. Consequently the changes in that power since the nineteen sixties are of a different nature and form

in those countries.

Moreover, when one assesses the autonomy of universities, in those countries where universities are government institutions, autonomy has distinctly different meaning from the one it has in countries whose higher education systems relate both to state and nation or in which university institutions are mainly financed by private sources.

In addition, access or admission must be defined differently in nations where 10-15%, or 25% or 50% of an eligible age group is admitted to higher education. Thus, a policy for admissions reads differently for England or Germany, Sweden or Italy, Japan or United States -- and can be adequately explained or compared only in terms of the varying habits of life, varying histories, varying economic developments of these countries.

A method for comparative higher education, consequently, would have to be established which would take account of differing rates of development, differing values, differing habits of thought and differing histories. It would have to be a kind of calculus which would permit complex, changing and "rolling" comparisons to be made.